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ABSTRACT

The banking model of education views students as empty passive minds to be filled by the teacher. As Paulo Freire perceived the model, the teacher is seen as possessing the currency of knowledge and distributing it to students. In the changing dynamics of the college literature classroom, the relationship between teacher and student should be more like a complex dance, in which teacher behaviors are responses to student behaviors. In two sophomore literature classes presented at Clemson University, instructors sought to subvert the role of the teacher by dividing the class into small reading groups, whose members choose and research their own readings and present their findings to the group. The teacher's role was to facilitate learning, not provide it. Some students either underreacted or overreacted to the new teaching model. Instructors realized later that they sometimes responded to student challenges authoritatively, in keeping with the banking model. The teachers also saw that students would have benefitted from more help in finding and evaluating resources, organizing findings, and reporting on their research to the groups. The quality of student research was high. All students gave the course a positive evaluation, even students who were initially resistent to the instructors' approach to teaching. (SG)

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CEA Twenty-Second
Annual Conference

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Defeating the Banking Concept of Education: An Application of Paulo Freire's Methodologies

Our goal is to return the study of literature back to the students as readers of literature. Most literature classes are set up on what Paulo Freire called "The Banking Concept of Education" in which a teacher who possesses all the knowledge in the classroom, that is all the money in the classroom economy, makes deposits into the empty, passive minds of her or his students. The most damaging feature of this model is that the teacher is the privileged reader and the final authority. The teacher, being the subject while the students mere objects, is the author/authority of and in the classroom.

Even though we say returning the study of literature to our students is our goal, the Banking model, we found, is stubbornly resilient because this is the model in spite of which we and our students have learned. We found that teaching and being a student within this model are ingrained behaviors that are difficult to break away from.

Though we may, as American teachers, intellectually assent to changing the dynamics of the classroom, actually changing our behavior and conversely expecting students to change their behavior initiates a complex dance in the classroom. Another way to put this is: given all the will in the world, we must, as teachers, still consciously examine our behavior in the

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classroom, and realize that our behaviors are inevitably responses to our students' behaviors. These actions and reactions are what we mean by this dance, a metaphor we will come back to. At first, in our zeal to subvert the banking concept of education, we thought that by simply changing positions, by rearranging, as our handout shows, the structure of our classroom, we could change the dance. We did not realize how complex our relationships with our students were.

At Clemson last spring, we team taught two sophomore literature classes and attempted to subvert the role of the teacher by breaking the class up into small reading groups. These groups chose their own reading material, researched this material and presented their research to their group. Our role as teachers was to facilitate learning, rather than to provide it.

With one class our relationship, or liberatory dance if you will, was smooth and graceful. In the traditional Banking model, the teacher always leads and the students always follow blindly, but with this class, when we stepped back to allow them freedom, they moved forward and made up their own dance. Our other class, however, would not step forward. When we stepped back, they simply stopped dancing. In fact, they sat down. What follows is a discussion of our different relationships with these two classes and a discussion of how these relationships evolved over the semester.

The students in the class that refused to dance either underreacted or overreacted, and we underreacted and overreacted

in response. When we changed the traditional structure they had known, the students adopted positions that, in hindsight, demanded that we change back to the traditional banking model. For example, when we refused to adopt an authoritarian position, some students felt that if discipline was not imposed from without, there were no rules at all. They did nothing essentially, except actively and enthusiastically test our resolve to maintain our liberatory position by refusing to invest any of themselves in a pedagogy that requires them to take active roles. These students underreacted.

Other students overreacted. When we did away with the typical, comfortable structure in which they were defined as passive learner, they were completely at a loss. Their confidence in their abilities to interpret a work of literature or even in their ability to understand a work of literature was nil. It was as if they became de-selfed in the face of adopting a new, active role.

One young woman's attitude was fairly typical of the class. After her group read one novel and had very superficially discussed it, she asked me what I thought the eyes meant in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye. I asked her what she thought. She then asked me what Morrison had said, so I told her that I didn't know and that it really didn't matter. I asked her again what she thought. She replied by asking me what other critics had said. She was looking for some authority to use and refused to think for herself. When I asked her again what she thought, she replied, "But that would only be my opinion." I finally convinced her that it was exactly her opinion that I was

interested in. This realization took her completely by surprise. The next class meeting, believe it or not, she discussed a topic for a paper with me that impressed me tremendously. It was obviously a topic that had bothered her as she read the novel, but she had been unwilling to mention it in her group because she felt her interpretation could not be valid.

She noticed that the eye, e-y-e, in Toni Morrison's novel The Bluest Eye, is singular and could also be replaced with the first person singular pronoun I. This made her wonder who the bluest I, or, in other words, who the saddest person could be, because Pecola, in her insanity, does not seem particularly aware of her situation at the end of the novel. The bluest person then could be the narrator, Claudia, and by extension, the reader who is looking through the narrator's eye. It was an amazingly complicated, subtle topic.

These resistive positions our students adopted, either to refuse to work or to feel themselves incapable of working, were efforts on their parts to force us to change back into the familiar roles that they had always known and in which they had an identity. We had unleashed anxiety that manifested itself in what we interpreted at the time as apathy. We failed to perceive that this apathy was, in reality, simply a manifestation of their lack of confidence in their abilities to understand and to interpret texts.

Looking back, we find that we handled the situation in one class by reacting exactly according to the steps of the banking model rather than a liberatory model. We got angry occasionally at this inertia and became too directive in the face of apathy. In effect, we did change back; we became the source of the answers and the voice of authority. We finally, and duplicitously, reimposed the banking model of education by talking them all into reading the same material. In other words, we began imposing our will on them even while we were affecting to be honest and liberatory. What we found was, despite our intellectual assent to changing the dance, that when the going got rough we could not maintain our position.

It is difficult, we see now, to maintain a changed position over the long haul. The authority available to us in the banking model is seductive in ways we did not always recognize. Though ideology is constitutive--there is no reaching a position outside of it--it is structured in layers that you can peel away only as you identify them.

In hindsight, we wish we had recognized their lack of confidence and had addressed that problem. We should have spent more time helping them find and evaluate resources in the library, helping them present their material to their groups, and helping them organize their group activities until they felt comfortable enough to work without us. Instead, we reinforced their lack of confidence by giving them freedom that they were unable to use. We should, with this particular class, have taken a middle position quickly--moving towards a different dance but recognizing our partners' initial positions. We did not do that;

we assumed they could quickly and effortlessly learn a new dance. Looking back, one class could, one class couldn't. For us, the failure in this class was as instructive as the success in our other class because it reinforced the need to respond to our students rather than blindly to impose structure upon them, however liberatory we feel this structure is.

At the end of the semester, we asked our classes to comment on the strengths and weaknesses of our methods. One student summed up the dilemma any liberatory pedagogy faces by admiring the informality we offered while at the same time asking for more discipline:

> I liked the informality of the class. I didn't feel like it was a waste of my time. I felt like I learned something new every time.
>
> My only advice would be that because the class was informal, some people took advantage of that. . . . I think the class should be watched a little bit more. . . . Just don't lose all the informality." (Linda)

Our other class, however, was on the whole very enthusiastic. They understood the freedom we were giving them and decided to explore literature on their own terms without pressure from an authority.

What impressed me most about both of these classes was how smart these students were. The Bluest Eye was our first novel and is a novel I have taught previously. However, on the first day of discussion, without any prompting from either of us, these groups were discussing the social classes that Toni Morrison

contrasts in the novel and the problem of the narrators. These are topics that I had devoted lectures and discussions to in previous classes, trying to get students to see something that these students in both classes were immediately picking up on. Continually, throughout the semester, the students surprised me and taught me things about the literature we read. We were peers engaged in a dialogue with our students. We were not imposing our views upon them and they recognized this.

In their evaluations of the course, over and over again they commented that we were "open to suggestions and questions." They appreciated the fact that even though the class had some structure, that "There was no strict atmosphere in the class [though] everyone worked well" (Mark). Another student remarked that most "teachers always [tell] their opinions about the novels, and [do] not really allow the students to voice their opinions." But, she continued, "this class has been much different" (Cathy).

A list of just some of their paper topics for The Bluest Eye will illustrate the quality of their thought. If you are familiar with the novel, these topics will make more sense. Three members of one group came up with three different ways of looking at the Dick and Jane passages with which Morrison begins the novel. One student said the passages foreshadow the development of Pecola from childhood innocence into madness. Another said the three passages reflect three different social classes in the novel, and a third student said the passages reflect three different characters in the novel. Other students

wanted to contrast Claudia and Pecola or wanted to contrast the relationship between Pecola and her father, Cholly, with the relationship between Claudia and her father. One student wanted to research the effects of child abuse. Another questioned the historical accuracy of the novel and was going to research to prove Morrison wrong, while still another disagreed and was determined to research to prove that Morrison is indeed historically accurate. Others wanted to examine the significance of different characters, notably Soaphead Church, and one other wanted to examine the narrative structure of the novel to discover why we feel sympathy for Cholly even though he rapes his daughter. The quality of their thought, sometimes, made us feel expendable.

The list of the contemporary works of literature they chose to read is just as impressive as their topics. They read Toni Morrison's latest novel Beloved, as well as Catcher in the Rye, Death of a Salesman, Slaughter-House Five, A Clockwork Orange, Bright Lights, Big City, Less than Zero, Night by Elie Wiesel, Deliverance, Lord of the Flies, For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide. . . , and one group read Maya Angelou's newest collection of poetry, I Shall Not Be Moved. And there were others.

By allowing them to select the literature they read and by allowing them to teach each other, we set out to empower our students and to free up their voices to permit them to use their abilities as readers and interpreters--to show them that their abilities are adequate and are to be trusted. We gave them access to the research, to the syllabus, and to the literature in

order to strengthen their critical confidence. We made it clear that not only are they allowed to chose the literature they will read, but they also can structure the class the way they want. We end up sometimes in a "messy" democracy or in one of Kenneth Burke's "parliamentary wrangles," but that is OK. As long as we treat our students democratically, they have a chance to gain more control over their lives by being forced, but gently, to become critically aware. It is only when we become authoritarian and dictatorial that we utterly prevent our students from becoming fully healthy, mentally whole human beings.

Without fail the students in both classes said they enjoyed the class and felt they had learned, but one student in particular, named Will, resisted, at first, our efforts to let him participate in his own education. He conveniently was unprepared early in the semester, and pretended not to care. He complained that six novels would be too much reading. He, however, ended up reading seven novels, mainly because of miscommunication within his group, but also because he began and finished reading the extra novel in a display of eagerness he would not and could not have shown at the start of the semester. Will, we think, represents both positions in the dance we have described; but he did finally step in, tentatively and then with more assurance, to claim his education as his own.

We'll end with Will's response to the class. His syntax reflects the informal nature of the writing we asked of him, but it also reflects his eagerness to record thoughts that are arriving into his consciousness faster than he can write.

When I first started with The Bluest Eye, our first book, I had trouble just understanding the meaning, along with the facts, but as time progressed and we are at Bright Lights, Big City these things come without even trying. Now when I read I think beyond just the storyline and see what it means to me. I draw my own conclusions which before were always my teacher. Reading finally has made me start to think. (Will, Student Evaluation, 1990)

Works Cited

Freire, Paulo. Pedagogy of the Oppressed. 1970. Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum, 1990.